

Britain: Who and what is the Policy Exchange think tank?

Richard Tyler
16 January 2008

The welcome failed prosecution of Foreign Office civil servant Derek Pasquill under the Official Secrets Act has inadvertently shed light once again on the Policy Exchange think tank. (See: “Britain: Prosecution of civil servant under Official Secrets Act fails”)

Pasquill had leaked government documents to the *Observer* newspaper concerning links between the Foreign Office and various Islamic groups. Journalist Martin Bright, who moved from the *Observer* to the *New Statesman* magazine, had used these documents in his pamphlet, “When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries: The British State’s flirtation with radical Islamism,” published by Policy Exchange.

Bright applauded “the Tory progressives at Policy Exchange” for publishing his work, which was billed as a denunciation of the government’s alliances with “a reactionary, authoritarian brand of Islam,” in favour of looking to “real grassroots moderates as allies.”

In fact, the *modus operandi* of Policy Exchange follows a well-trod path. Ever since the 9/11 attacks, sections of the British political establishment and the media (like their counterparts in the US) have followed a sustained, and at times virulent, Islamophobic campaign that has demonised Muslims. Conducted under the banner of opposing Islamic extremism, its political objective has been to defend the neo-colonialist policy of pre-emptive war and occupation embarked upon by the American and British ruling elite.

The recent controversy involving Policy Exchange and the BBC’s flagship current affairs programme “Newsnight” is instructive in this regard.

Towards the end of last year, “Newsnight” broadcast a story casting doubts on a Policy Exchange report that claimed to have uncovered the widespread sale of extremist Islamic literature at mosques in Britain.

In “The Hijacking of British Islam,” the think tank asserted that its researchers were able to purchase radical Islamic writings that were “anti-Semitic, misogynistic, separatist and homophobic,” and were said to be available at about a quarter of the mosques and other Islamic organisations they visited.

When it was published in October 2007, on the eve of a state visit by Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah, “The Hijacking of British Islam” received front-page coverage. According to the

Guardian newspaper, “Tory leader David Cameron pledged to raise the revelations with King Abdullah, because much of the literature was said to have been sourced from Saudi Arabia.”

Earlier that same month, Policy Exchange had offered “Newsnight” an “exclusive” deal to report the publication of its report, also supplying the programme with copies of receipts it claimed evidenced the purchase of the extremist literature.

In seeking to verify that such literature had in fact been purchased from the mosques and other Islamic organisations identified by Policy Exchange, “Newsnight” reporter Richard Watson showed the receipts to a representative of one of the mosques, who categorically denied they had originated from his organisation.

In his blog, “Newsnight” editor Peter Barron says that “We decided to look at the rest of the receipts and quickly identified five of the 25 which looked suspicious. They appeared to have been created on a home computer, rather than printed professionally as you would expect. The printed names and addresses of some of the mosques contained simple errors and two of the receipts purportedly from different mosques appeared to have been written by the same hand.” (http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/peter_barron)

On this basis, “Newsnight” declined to broadcast an item on the launch of the Policy Exchange report in October.

Further investigation by “Newsnight” into the authenticity of the receipts did then result in a broadcast piece on its programme of December 12 by reporter Richard Watson exposing these serious doubts about the “evidence” that had been presented by Policy Exchange to verify its purchase of the literature.

The discrepancies established by “Newsnight” included:

- * A receipt from North London mosque’s bookshop—when the mosque does not have a bookshop.

- * A receipt from Euston mosque, with the address on the document being from an entirely different mosque on North Gower Street.

- * Evidence from a forensic graphologist that handwriting on two separate receipts from two different mosques most likely came from the same individual.

* Forensic evidence pointing to the likelihood that writing on one receipt had been done on top of a receipt from a completely different mosque.

Watson's report was then followed by a heated interview in which "Newsnight" frontman Jeremy Paxman challenged the Policy Exchange research director Dean Godson about the legitimacy of the receipts and the implication this had for the findings of the report.

Following the broadcast, Policy Exchange issued a statement in which it said it stood by its report and threatening to take the BBC to court, a threat that has so far not materialised.

In his BBC blog, "Newsnight" editor Peter Barron writes, "Mr Godson says he stands by his report 100%. I also stand by our report 100%. I don't think we can both be right."

Policy Exchange has yet to produce any convincing explanation for the discrepancies in the receipts highlighted by "Newsnight".

Echoing Godson's comments on the programme, a press announcement on the Policy Exchange website states, "The receipts are not, however, mentioned in the report and the report's findings do not rely upon their existence. The report relies instead on the testimony of our Muslim research team."

But this begs the question—if at least some of the receipts produced by Policy Exchange's "Muslim research team" are of dubious provenance, why then should their report, which claims to have found the widespread sale of extremist Islamic literature at British mosques, be taken as good coin?

The Policy Exchange website states that it is "committed to an evidence-based approach to policy development." However, when the veracity of some of its evidence was called into question, the organisation provided no explanation for the inconsistencies and instead insists that the proof of its contentions are to be found in the "testimony" of those who gathered the disputed evidence!

Amongst the instigators of Policy Exchange was Michael Gove, author of "Celsius 7/7—how the West's policy of appeasement has provoked yet more fundamentalist terror and what has to be done now." Gove is a Tory MP, as is another of the think tank's founders, Nicholas Boles.

The chairman of Policy Exchange is Charles Moore, formerly editor of two of Britain's leading pro-Tory publications, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Spectator* magazine. He is currently working on the authorised biography of Margaret Thatcher.

The think tank's Research Director, Dean Godson, is a former chief leader writer for the *Daily Telegraph*, and has also functioned as Special Assistant to the *Telegraph's* then-owner, Conrad Black.

Godson stood as a Tory candidate in the 1997 general election, with the BBC including in his candidate's CV the fact he was "a columnist Librarian to Sir James Goldsmith, 1990-92 Research Fellow, Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies,

1987-89 Special Assistant to John Lehman, Secretary of US Navy, 1983-84."

Black, who has since been sentenced to six and half years' imprisonment for fraud, is described by the Encyclopaedia of World Biography as "an outspoken right-wing intellectual, a friend of Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney, and admired by British prime minister Margaret Thatcher."

Sir James Goldsmith, who died in 1997, was a billionaire, a fervent anti-communist and an opponent of the European Union, setting up the short-lived Referendum Party.

John Lehman, served as Navy Secretary under President Reagan, going on to join some of the most notorious conservative think tanks such as the Project for the New American Century and the Heritage Foundation, and is a board member of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, which at the height of the Cold War provided the US elite with ideological ammunition against the Soviet Union.

Dean Godson also has close family links with individuals with an extreme right-wing pedigree who have worked within the inner echelons of the US state.

His father, Joseph Godson, was a US Labour attaché in London in the 1950s, said to have been present at a series of secret meetings where the then-Labour Party leader Hugh Gaitskill plotted to have his left-wing opponent Aneurin Bevan expelled.

His brother, Roy, served on the National Security Council and the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board from 1982 to 1988. Following the Iran/Contra affair, the Independent Counsel's Report found that he had helped Oliver North direct thousands of dollars to the Contras through the Heritage Foundation.

Roy Godson's 1995 book, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards*, offers detailed accounts of how to conduct covert operations, described as "the attempt by a government or group to influence events in another state or territory without revealing its own involvement."

The disputed "The Hijacking of British Islam" report was authored by Denis Mac Eoin, a former lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at Newcastle University, now a Royal Literary Fund Fellow. Mac Eoin has been accused of anti-Islamic prejudice after he reportedly stated: "I do not hold a brief for Islam. On the contrary, I have very negative feelings about it.... I am pro-Israeli and involve myself in the defence of Israel."



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact